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The problems, promise and pragmatism of community food growing

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Introduction

As both long-term practitioners and researchers of community food growing, the authors of this editorial know first-hand the profound power of community food growing (CFG). And for many individuals involved in such initiatives the same is no doubt true; the literature is full of compelling testimonial evidence of the good CFG does, and impressive arguments as to positive impacts such activities could have at larger scale. That said, robust evidence in support of these strongly felt beliefs remains scant, and while the conversation has shifted in recent years to take account of the sometimes unintended or negative aspects of CFG, no firm consensus has been reached about how such forms of food growing should adapt to new conditions, or scaled up to maximise their positive impacts.

Alongside associated forms of socially and politically conscious food production, CFG is routinely connected to a remarkably wide variety of issues. Even specific forms of CFG, such as community gardens, are talked about in terms of their multi-functionality: the American Community Garden Association, for example, suggest such spaces can provide ‘a catalyst for neighborhood and community development, stimulating social interaction, encouraging self-reliance, beautifying neighborhoods, producing nutritious food, reducing family food budgets, conserving resources and creating opportunities for recreation, exercise, therapy and education’ (ACGA, 2018). However, finding ways to substantiate these ideas has proved difficult.

It was exactly this strategic uncertainty which created the impetus for Critical Foodscapes, initially as a conference at the University of Warwick in July 2016, and now in this special issue. At point of conception, two main main questions were felt to dominate theory and practice around CFG. The first was the matter of definition: *what do we mean by ‘community food growing’?* CFG is (quite deliberately) a broad term, intended to represent a wide variety of practices. As a result, however, CFG also means different things depending on when and where one is situated (see Guitart et al., 2012). As has been noted, for example, disparities between approaches to CFG are particularly noticeable between the Global South and the Global North, where forms of collective food growing ‘are often not a choice; they are a means of survival’ (Opitz et al., 2016). However, this is far from being a hard and fast rule, as evidenced by community gardens in the United States (McClintock, 2008), especially those intending to address food insecurity associated with food deserts (Corrigan, 2011; WinklerPrins, 2017).

Even when focused on the Global North, however, CFG can be protean in the extreme, where evidence is emerging of aspects of the approach being co-opted or adopted by less community-based institutions (Pudup, 2008). CFG also falls under and alongside other forms of food growing which are not yet clearly defined; for example, peri-urban and urban agriculture (Opitz et al., 2016), community supported agriculture (Galt et al., 2016), community gardens (Krasny and Tidball, 2017), and guerilla gardening (Finn, 2014).

CFG and associated forms of cultivation present a confoundingly complex and only partially-mapped landscape of practices, meanings, and forms. However, such definitional confusions - while frustrating - are crucial for those of us who wish to critically explore the reasons relating to why and for whom such gardens exist. In this short introduction to this special issue we pause to acknowledge the importance of such debates in the ongoing struggle to shape just and sustainable food systems, especially where they help identify new or previously submerged injustices. In the interests of clarity, however, we also move to identify a reflexively simple and provisional definition; that is, following Guitart et al.'s (2012) discussion, we understand the term 'community food growing' as denoting initiatives which are "managed and operated by members of a local community in which food or flowers are cultivated" (p. 364). This definition is adopted here, not only because it draws on some of the most widely-cited articles about CFG (Holland, 2004; Pudup, 2008; Kingsley et al., 2009), but also because it is simple enough to capture the heterogeneous nature of practices in evidence, and explored at the conference.

The second question relates to how academics might best give CFG initiatives greater strength and visibility. In the context of multiple and intertwined food system crises, a growing number of CFG initiatives are appearing, and academics, governments, and non-governmental organisations alike are increasingly striving to make sense of and support them. Despite a long history of being understood as having straightforwardly positive political, social, and environmental benefits (Alaimo et al., 2008; Firth et al., 2011; Milbourne, 2012; Purcell and Tyman, 2015; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004; Wakefield et al., 2007; White, 2011), recent research on CFG initiatives has returned mixed results, with some outwardly pessimistic contributions - notably those suggesting complicity with the forces of neoliberalism (Ghose and Pettygrove, 2014; Pudup, 2008; Quastel, 2009). More ambivalent responses (Barron, 2016; Guthman, 2008; McClintock, 2014; Tornaghi, 2014; Sonnino and Hanmer, 2016) have tended to point out CFG's complicated entanglements in ostensibly contradictory politics, not least tensions between gardens' pedestrian or conformist aspects and their radical promise. Extremely useful and influential in this regard is McClintock's (2014) paper, which invites us to embrace such tensions, suggesting that 'coming to terms with its internal contradictions can help better position urban agriculture within a coordinated efforts for structural change' (p. 149).

The papers cited above have been instrumental in signalling the need for more substantial efforts to build a robust evidence base and for academic insight to further strengthen the practice and influence of CFG. Not only have they been successful in highlighting a plethora of research gaps, but also the pervasiveness of unexamined assumptions and unconscious biases apparent in the study and practice of CFG. The question of the role of researchers in the CFG movement is one we will return to below, and no doubt on many occasions to come. As a reflection on the Critical Foodscapes conference and resulting papers, the remainder of this editorial is intended to 1) frame the current debate by giving a brief overview of the literature; 2) introduce some of the major themes addressed by the conference, and each paper; and 3) offer some tentative thoughts on future research directions.

Review

Critical Foodscapes comes at a time when CFG research has been developing and evolving rapidly, much like the practice itself. Several literature reviews have considered CFG in its various forms, including community gardens (Guitart et al., 2012) urban agriculture in developed countries (Mok et al., 2014), and urban home food gardens (Taylor and Lovell, 2014). Most of the literature about community gardens has considered those in “low income earning areas with different cultural backgrounds in industrial cities in the USA,” reflecting a socio-political interest in these areas (Guitart et al., 2012, p. 368). The grey literature offers a much more substantive focus on CFG in developing countries (ie. FAO, 2007; World Bank, 2013). CFG has been considered by a variety of disciplines which have produced evidence of the range of benefits and motivations associated with these projects (Guitart et al., 2012). These include community development and cohesion (Armstrong, 2000; Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny, 2004) mental and physical health benefits (Alaimo et al., 2008; Austin et al., 2006; Wakefield et al., 2007), education (Corkery, 2004), economic benefits (Blair et al., 1991), and political and personal empowerment (Slater, 2001; Jackson, 2017 in this issue). Whilst positive environmental outcomes have been credited to community gardens, few of these claims are substantiated by studies from a natural sciences perspective or quantitative methodologies (Guitart et al., 2012). Other gaps include impacts of urban sprawl on, understanding governmental support for, impacts of pollutants in, and the carbon footprint of urban food growing, as well as how urban food growing can contribute to the self sufficiency of cities (Mok et al., 2013).

Since publication of the above reviews, we have seen an increase in research problematising CFG, as well as attention to several key issues: urban food growing policy development, environmental outcomes and quantification of outcomes, and participatory methodologies for studying urban food growing. The rest of this section highlights key developments in these areas.

Problematising Community Food Growing

As highlighted above, the positive potential for CFG is increasingly being problematised. Examples include Guthman’s (2008) description of community gardening as a vehicle to impose “whitened cultural practices” on African American-inhabited neighbourhoods (p. 431). McClintock (2014) has outlined the different paradigms through which stakeholders in urban agriculture engage with these initiatives, and mapped some of the internal contradictions. There are also competing visions of what the purpose of CFG is, with a distinct divide between those who view it as a “food producing practice” (Tornaghi, 2017, p. 783) and those who feel “the main benefits of urban cultivation are social” (Martin et al., 2014, p. 752). This tension remains largely unresolved, both within and outside academia, and rather than needing resolution, might help to deepen our understanding of CFG as a phenomenon (McClintock, 2014).

The value of CFG has also been problematised through work which brings a local nuance to generalised claims for its beneficial impacts. For example, for those areas regarded as food deserts (Wang et al., 2014), and its influence on diet and nutrition (Castro et al., 2013; Grier et al., 2014), may be specific to certain local contexts, so not possible everywhere. Some articles in this special issue extend the academic debate in this way: Bonow and Normark provide insight into a Swedish case study, finding that CFG makes a limited contribution to Stockholm’s vision of

a 'sustainable city', whilst Jackson explores the production of social capital in community gardens in one UK city.

Policy Development

There is also an increasing interest in considering CFG in the more holistic context of city-region food systems (FAO & RUAF, 2015) and integrating gardens within future urban planning and policy. For example, in 2015, 138 cities from all over the world signed up to the Milan Urban Food Policy Pact (2015) to commit to improving urban food system governance in order to deliver socially and environmentally sustainable food systems. There has also been documentation of food practice in urban food policy (IPES, 2017), while speakers at *Critical Foodscapes* noted the rise of cities as locus for strategies driving food system innovation (see Keech and Reed, this issue).

Following calls for policy development (e.g. van Veenhuizen and Danso, 2007), the need to manage the explosion of interest of CFG and to genuinely address issues of food insecurity through landscape scale delivery (Smith et al., 2013), governments at all levels are developing policies to support its development (Jermé & Wakefield, 2013; Laycock, 2013) (see also the Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012). These policies - or "new political spaces" (Hajer, 2013) - are not particularly well-researched, likely due to their informal nature (as in Laycock, 2013), or operation outside conventional policy frameworks (Cohen and Reynolds, 2014; Hardman and Larkham, 2014). One of the challenges with public policies on urban food growing is that they are seen as 'alternative', which prevents such initiatives moving from the marginal to the mainstream (Witheridge and Morris, 2016). Researchers have also noted that creating policy through public consultations with high rates of participation regularly results in more effective policies and greater social legitimacy (Cohen and Reynolds, 2014; Van der Jagt et al., 2016); grassroots advocacy and local government support are both important drivers in establishing new urban food growing policies (Huang and Drescher, 2015).

Environmental Outcomes & Quantification of Outcomes

Following Guitart et al.'s (2012) calls to address a lack of empirical evidence of environmental outcomes in CFG, a number of scholars have attempted to redress the gap. Examples include work on soil contamination in community gardens (Bugdalski et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2014), biodiversity and ecosystem services (Orsini et al., 2014; Birkin and Goulson, 2015; Speak et al., 2015), and agrobiodiversity (Guitart et al., 2014). There has also been work to develop frameworks for measuring environmental outcomes, such as Farming Concrete's Data Collection Toolkit (Design Trust for Public Space, 2015) for community gardens and farms and Goldstein et al.'s (2014) development of typologies of urban agriculture in order to quantify environmental 'foodprints.'

In addition to these empirical works, reviews have considered the environmental outcomes of CFG. For example, Ferguson and Lovell (2014) reviewed academic and grey literature to explore permaculture as an agroecological practice, whilst Lin et al. (2015) focused on biodiversity and ecosystem services. There has been increasing effort to quantify other non-environmental outcomes of community gardens, such as the amount of money participants save on their food

(Algert et al., 2014), and crop yields (Gittleman et al., 2012; CoDyre et al., 2015). One paper in this collection proposes an alternative form of Sustainability Impact Assessment applicable to community growing initiatives (Schmutz et al.).

Participatory Methodologies

Participatory approaches have long been used in studies of CFG, however, a much more diverse and creative set of methodologies and methods are now being adopted. These include Participatory Action Research (Bryant and Chahine, 2016; Marsh et al., 2017), youth peer interviews (Lile and Richards, 2016), citizen science (Birkin and Goulson, 2015), participatory mapping (Shillington, 2013), Photovoice (Boston et al., 2015; Harper and Alfonso, 2016), and participatory video (Fulford and Thompson, 2013; Yap, 2017). These methods provide some of the most fertile terrain for not only filling many of CFG's 'research gaps', but for simultaneously building capacity and long-term resilience (People's Knowledge Collective, 2017). The extent to which these approaches are delivering genuine participation for community food growers could become one of the most important horizons for the future study of CFG.

Overview of the issue

As the above review indicates, a wealth of CFG activity is feeding a similar abundance of academic work, which increasingly draws out complexities and tensions, questioning what projects aspire to and can achieve. It was within this context that *Critical Foodscapes* was conceived, as a forum bringing together researchers, practitioners and many who straddle the two roles. The conference aimed for a critical approach to CFG, to bring to light often hidden problems, whilst aiming to remain constructive so as to generate solution-oriented discussion. Chiara Tornaghi's keynote speech encapsulated this intention, opening with the suggestion that those present were united by a wish to take stock of achievements and identify what remains to be done.

Tornaghi's recent work is emblematic within academic literature of a move beyond celebration of urban and community growing with limited critical reflection (Tornaghi, 2014; 2017). As she noted on the day, CFG is a multifunctional practice about which "everything can be promised". Yet, as Tornaghi went on to detail, food growing remains a marginalised practice in cities, so projects struggle to achieve their goals; rich promise is often not realised. The reasons for this, Tornaghi claims, are embedded in the nature of the neo-liberal city – planning laws, land rights, market forces and more – and are therefore deeply structural. The response, she suggested, requires becoming "more political around food", making our largely individualised choices about what to buy and eat into shared concerns requiring collective action.

For those who agree with this political 'call to arms', the question is how to begin. Tornaghi's address suggested ways such political work might progress, including a united urban-rural movement for food sovereignty. A more immediate opportunity for those at the conference to act on was to bring to the surface common problems which are currently treated as isolated anomalies. Few problems around CFG are unique, as demonstrated by the sight of audiences nodding in recognition of issues highlighted by presenters, or comments recommending

resolutions tried elsewhere. Yet as Dan Keech and Matt Reed suggest in their consideration of communication within alternative food movements (this issue), actors can be surprisingly insular. Recognising that one project's challenge is not unique but symptomatic of systemic failings is a step towards collective political action to address root causes of food growing problems.

In taking this step, however, other difficulties surfaced during the conference which have to be addressed if political work around CFG is to progress. Having an audience bringing together academics and those immersed in practical work to grow food and run community projects meant they were sometimes at odds. This is partly caused by differing priorities – wanting to get on and do food growing, versus a focus on the discourse about and analysis of it. Chatter during lunch breaks aired frustration with academics who are 'all talk' and rarely seem to get their hands dirty. This is a common tension, one deftly discussed by Reynolds and Cohen (2016) in work focused on New York's urban growers, some of whom have become increasingly frustrated by researchers who arrive, extract data and ideas then disappear, without providing benefits for those studied.

Academics rarely seek to undermine community action – especially as many who study CFG are themselves community growers – but there is a risk that being critical, whatever one's intention, can feel like negativity and attack. Highlighting limits to what growing projects achieve or how they might have unintended negative consequences may switch off participants, funders and policy makers, meaning that conditions become even more challenging for committed practitioners. In the short term, it is unrealistic to expect a community project to overcome the entrenched structural problems which, as Tornaghi suggested, make urban environments 'food disabling'. Growing some food in ways which benefit individuals is a pragmatic option for people wanting to 'do something', and no one would want beneficiaries to miss out. But what more might be achieved if urban environments were made 'food enabling'? Or, as recent research on gentrification has argued (Anguelovski et al. 2017), if we made addressing the historical injustices underlying food production a priority?

The type of political work which Tornaghi considers necessary to make towns and cities 'food enabling' can create space for both academic and practitioner participation. But it is not clear whether practitioners whose current focus is practical food growing, right here and now, are able to participate in broader action to grow the right structural conditions to enable urban community food growing 'out there' and in future, or that academics with a critical perspective on the structural causes are able to translate this into political action to tackle them. Do either group have capacity to do more? These questions highlight that taking up the challenge of making food more political, requires academics and practitioners to agree what kind of political work is needed, desired and can be tackled together. Events like *Critical Foodscapes* offer a safe and inclusive forum for these debates – spaces to begin making individual problems visible as common concerns, and to mobilise collective action. They also reminds us that those involved need to recognise how each other's priorities and skills differ, in order to agree how to work together effectively.

Articles in this issue criss-cross the terrain of these issues, and the globe, presenting a range of approaches to studying CFG. Two papers position CFG in relation to sustainability, and consider the extent to which it advances sustainability. Bonow and Normark provide a case study of

community gardening in Stockholm, Sweden in which they are critical of the degree to which present forms of CFG contribute to sustainability, suggesting that an instrumental approach to governance limits the projects' impacts and longevity. Schmutz et al. introduce Sustainability Impact Assessment as a tool to compare forms of short food supply chain, including home and community growing initiatives. Applying this tool to compare how producers and consumers in London perceive multiple dimensions of food sustainability reveals interesting contrasts between their perspectives. Also taking a UK perspective is the paper by Jackson which focuses on one pillar of sustainability: the social. Her case study of community gardens in Lincoln considers how they have contributed to building social capital locally and argues that the main asset of community gardening is its "flexible and holistic approach" to community building.

The nature and form of spaces occupied and utilised by CFG initiatives is a theme across the remaining papers. Susan Haedicke describes what was on the surface an artistic project to beautify and enliven a neglected urban space in Paris. But, as she describes, the stories generated and exchanged by the Aroma Home project critique contemporary urban life, and provide politically charged tales of how it could be different. Rebecca St. Claire and colleagues bring a temporal dimension to these spatial issues through focusing on a 'meanwhile' or temporary growing site. They suggest that such spaces offer multiple and diverse benefits, yet questions remain regarding the practicalities of urban sites which are only offered for CFG on a temporary basis. Virtual and networked spaces come to the fore as Dan Keech and Matt Reed consider online media as a central aspect of food activism in cities. Focusing on activists in Bristol, UK they examine a variety of traditional and social media, identifying a clear divide between how movements represent themselves and how others portray their agenda, with implications which limit activists' power to influence. Finally, Rosenfeld and Kell explore food plants crossing global borders to live across time and space in the form of crops grown beyond the region where they were traditionally cultivated. They highlight a multitude of benefits growers obtain through cultivating exotic crops, and the need to provide support for continued cultivation by current and future generations in order to maintain important plant diversity adapted to local growing conditions.

Conclusion

One of the ironies of academic inquiry is that it tends to generate questions rather than resolving them - but we embrace this as part of the journey towards a reflexive politics. A theme shared by all the papers in this issue is the capacity of CFG initiatives to strengthen social and political networks, and provide platforms to address shortfalls in citizen participation in food system governance. In this regard, researchers are well placed to engage with CFG, using the wealth of participatory research methodologies available, especially those which valorise co-production of knowledge at all stages of the research design and implementation. This is an approach which is now widely called for in social science and agricultural research (IPES, 2016), but remains under-developed and underutilised.

A large part of what Critical Foodscapes sought to address were gaps in the evidence base about the environmental, nutritional, and socio-economic impacts of CFG, and since the conference, as noted above, research has continued to plug these gaps (see Raja et al., 2017). The issues raised by *Critical Foodscapes* suggest the importance of taking a step back to consider the bigger-picture context of CFG, and fundamental questions, not least what we as academics aim to achieve. Whatever the question in immediate view, the main challenges for future CFG research, we suggest, centre on how the research itself can harmonise with the participatory and collaborative ethos embodied by the majority of CFG projects. The people-centred nature of CFG means that in order to support its progress, future academic work should begin with the intention of engaging participants as co-producers of knowledge.

In this respect, while Critical Foodscapes began looking for missing evidence for CFG's (often material) 'benefits', our principal reflections relate to CFG's as a powerful site of convergence for various movements aiming for social justice. In this sense, CFG research must immediately cease to be yet another form of inquiry which is *done to* its participants; instead it must continue to develop as a place of integration between the aims of researchers and practitioners. That is, to operationalise the ideal once espoused by indigenous activist Lilla Watson: 'If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together' (qtd. in Treviño and McCormack 2016).

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